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# Purgatory: a triptych

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# Purgatory: a triptych

by

Samantha Lopez  
Spring, 2000

Part I

The Beginning of the End

Mike walked into his two bedroom apartment and entered the alarm code. He lived with his seventeen year-old daughter, Jennifer, who would be home from school, but lately she'd been leaving the alarm armed so he would inadvertently set it off. They argued constantly. They didn't used to. Mike never knew what to say. It was a catch-22, and now she started pulling this passive-aggressive bullshit. He thought achingly about Sarah, his wife who had died four years before, and knew she would have known what to do. After Sarah's death, Jennifer and Mike had grown closer together, but then Jennifer began dating. What was it about dating that sent teen-age girls into the realm of irrationality?

He tossed his briefcase on the living room couch and undid the knot in his tie. The dishes were clean and put up. He then noticed the place had been vacuumed. Perhaps she was trying to make amends.

"Jenn? Want to go grab something to eat?"

Silence.

He sighed and walked towards her room, "Honey, look, I'm sorry about last. . ."

His sentence trailed off when he realized she wasn't in the room. He looked around. The girlish pink drapes from her childhood clashed with the Sandman comic poster on the wall. He picked up the clay pinch pot that sat on the upper shelf of her bookshelf. She'd made it in kindergarten. Jenn was a packrat. Her bed was neatly made. Beside her bed

was an empty night-stand. The picture was gone, the last picture of the three of them together before her mother had died. He then noticed other things missing, her bookshelves held fewer books. He went to the closet. Most of her clothes were gone. It was when he turned that he noticed the note on the pillow. His heart seized.

Shaking, he picked up the notebook paper that was full of her handwriting. God, why now? Why at all? He remembered the night before.

He'd been pretty hard on her last night, even going as far as removing the computer from her room. He had caught her several times talking on-line with her latest boyfriend at all hours of the night. This time, he'd had enough. He had warned her, he reminded himself. In the struggle of removing the monitor and keyboard, the keyboard fell, letters skittering across the kitchen floor.

He picked up the phone. "Cynthia? This is Mike."

His voice had a distant, monotone quality that would have startled him had his mind not been reeling, "Jennifer's run away."

"I'll be right over."

"God, If I see that son of a bitch. . ." he growled.

"Mike, things are going to be okay."

Cynthia was a friend of Mike's from work. He worked as an architect for a large firm. Cynthia, a publicist for the firm, had dealt very little with Mike. They met when

Cynthia couldn't get her car out of the parking lot. He'd given her a ride home. Since then, they regularly had lunch together. She had a child from a previous marriage, a son, but her husband had custody. He had re-married, providing "a more stable atmosphere," as the court put it. She'd actually come to terms with her life and Mike often wondered how she handled such a mess.

With Jennifer, there had been the normal trials and tribulations of having a teenage daughter. The green, then red hair. Mike had teased Jennifer about wanting to be a Christmas tree. He had drawn the line at the permanent blue hair dye (which he didn't know existed). She had wanted to color her hair after a Japanese animation movie character she had seen. Was it the Anime' movies? She'd begun to withdraw into herself after that. Jennifer had stopped auditioning for the musicals she had loved.

In spite of the parenting help he yearned for, he didn't think he could ever re-marry. Sarah was his angel. She had had long, blond hair. Jennifer had gotten her dark locks from him. Mike's life had been perfect, until Sarah died. Thinking about the whole mess caused his chest to tighten. He had only missed a few days after the funeral, but it was enough. They had been looking for the first person to screw up. He lost his job.

"Sorry, Mike," they had said. "downsizing. It's nothing personal."

He'd thrown the books and other belongings from his desk into the trunk of his

car. Then, he went to the bar. Some of his co-workers had met him there. He hadn't met to drink as much as he did, but he was still in control.

Jennifer was sitting on the couch waiting for him. "Do you know what time it is!"

"Oh, quit your bitching." It was the first time he'd sworn at her.

"I was worried sick, Dad."

Mike went over to the VCR and put in a tape. "The Dirty Dozen" was written across the label. The VCR clicked repeatedly and spit the tape out.

"Dad, where were you?"

Mike tried to force the tape in again. He swore. "I was out. Why the fuck aren't you in bed?"

Jennifer approached. "You've got it in crooked." She reached for the tape.

"Get away. If the damn thing doesn't want to work." He shoved the tape in hard.

"You son of a bitch." He punched the VCR, then looked up at his daughter.

She'd backed away from him, hugging herself. Her eyes were wide, then she looked away. "I'm going to bed," she said softly.

The doorbell pulled Mike away from his reminiscing.

He put down the clay pot in the kitchen, keeping it in his sight, and opened the door. Cynthia stood in the doorway wearing sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt. She

hugged him, and he let her in.

“Have you called the police?”

He shook his head.

Cynthia walked to the phone and dialed the non-emergency number. She spoke for a few minutes with someone on the other end as Mike stared at the little clay pot, clenching and releasing his fists.

Cynthia hung up the phone. “There’s nothing they can do. Well, actually, he said that they could bring her back to the doorstep, but there’s nothing to keep her from running away again since she’s only a few weeks from being 18.”

“Dammit!” He took the note and crumpled it, hurling it as far as the ball would go. “Why did she do this to me?”

Cynthia picked up and un-crumpled the note Jennifer had left. She set it beside the phone. Mike walked over and re-read it. “She said she couldn’t handle the fighting, and I wouldn’t let her grow up.”

Cynthia sat, curled up on the couch.

“Do you think she’s pregnant?”

“I don’t know.” She ran her hands through her short-cropped blonde hair. “Do you know the boyfriend’s phone number? Maybe you could talk to his parents.”

“His parents are dead. His mom died at the beginning of the year. His father a couple of years ago.”



"My God," she said softly. "That's awful."

He pulled out the phonebook. The last page held a list of personal numbers scrawled in various colors, turning the page into an off beat art project. Sarah's mother's number was still in Sarah's handwriting. He traced his finger across the scratchy penmanship, then handed the book to Cynthia. "It's near the bottom."

"Do you want to call him?"

"I'd rather strangle him."

The brief phone conversation revealed little information.

"Greg hasn't seen her," Cynthia said. "He expects to."

"He's probably fucking her right now."

"I think you're judging a bit, there."

"What would you do if your son had done this?"

She smiled weakly. "I'd go out of my mind."

The two of them spent the rest of the day driving the Houston area. Anywhere Mike had ever taken or seen his daughter, they visited, but Jennifer wasn't anywhere they looked. Cynthia ended up sleeping over. It was the only reason Mike fell asleep—that and the two Nytol he took.

Later that day, Greg called and said he knew where Jennifer was but had been

told not to reveal where. Cynthia fielded most of the phone calls as Mike went through repeating waves of guilt, shock, then anger.

Mike called into work the first two days, driving for hours, searching. He realized he wasn't getting anywhere, and he couldn't risk missing any more days at work. The oil recession hit Houston hard, and businesses were going under quickly. The next two weeks passed numbly. Jennifer refused to talk to him. Greg would leave messages on the answering machine that Jennifer was fine. Greg seemed determined not to call when Mike was home. There were also messages from Cynthia. The first few days, Mike picked up the phone on the first ring, but as his hope for reconciliation dwindled, he let the machine get the phone.

Cynthia finally cornered him at lunch one day. "Mike, I think you should see a psychiatrist."

"You think it's my fault, don't you?"

"I didn't say that."

"I'm not going to a fucking shrink."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're going through a hard time."

Mike stared down at his uneaten food. Cynthia looked at the suit that was now hanging loose on him.

"I went to one after Mitchell left me. It helped me to get out of the hell I was in."

"Just because you were a nutcase then, doesn't mean I am one now."

Cynthia's eyes watered with anger. She gathered her lunch and stood to leave.

"Goddammit. I'm sorry. I just. . . I can't handle this."

Cynthia looked at him, her head cocked to the side.

"Don't attack the people that are trying to help. You can't get through this alone."

Mike went back to the empty apartment. He sat down at the dark oak breakfast table that was layered in unread newspapers, empty beer bottles and his two phonebooks.

He grabbed one of the phone books and opened it to "counseling."

After making the appointment, he grabbed the trashcan and began filling it with the newspapers and beer bottles.

Six months passed before Jennifer called him. They'd had third party conversations through his answering machine, and he had tried writing her through Greg's address, a post office box.

The high school had called and repeatedly told him how she had missed days of school. They'd suggested family counseling, but Jennifer wouldn't go. They finally told him that she would have to repeat her senior year due to excessive absences.

When the phone rang, he answered the it expecting Cynthia. They had theatre

tickets to Miss Saigon. He was already running behind, but time stopped when he heard his daughter's voice.

"Dad?"

"Jennifer." He sat down, his heart racing. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said nervously. "How are you?"

"I'm okay." His voice softened. "I miss you, honey."

The awkward silence strained. "I was just wondering about the college fund we'd set up."

"You want to go to college? You have to finish high school first." He could hear the bitterness creeping into his voice and tried to talk himself down.

"I was planning on getting a GED."

"People won't look at it the same as a high school diploma."

She sighed "I didn't call to argue."

"Actually, Jennifer, I was heading out the door. I was going to the theatre with Cynthia and. . ."

"You're still seeing her?"

"I thought you liked Cynthia."

Jennifer sighed. "Whatever..."

"Let me think about the money. Do you want to meet somewhere? We could talk."

“We can talk on the phone.”

Mike flinched, but focused on maintaining his composure. “Call me tomorrow. I’ll be home around 6, unless,” he added tentatively, “you want to give me your number and I can call you.”

“I’ll call you.”

Mike tried desperately to think of something to say to make her come to her senses, something to make it all better.

“Bye, Dad.”

“I love you. . .” the phone clicked as she hung-up.

He swallowed and dialed Cynthia to let her know that he was running late.

Mike was only at the play in body that night. Cynthia may have noticed but she didn’t say anything. They went through a McDonald’s drive-thru, grabbed a couple of burgers, and returned to his apartment.

“I can’t believe they got an entire helicopter on stage.”

“Umm.”

“Then, when the aliens flew down and ended the war in a peace treaty,” she added dryly. She sat on the living room floor.

Mike sat on the couch and stared in the direction of the phone.

“Mike are you going to talk to me?”

“Jenn called.”

“How is she?”

“She wants money.”

Cynthia took a sip of her Diet Coke.

“Nothing. No real conversation for six months until now. I’m a God damn bank to her.”

Though his words held anger, his voice was broken. Cynthia went to the couch and cradled his head on her shoulder.

“It’s a start, isn’t it?”

Mike lifted his head up. “Should I give her the money? It’s only a few hundred dollars. We were saving it for college.”

Cynthia shrugged. “You could ask your therapist.”

Mike shook his head. “She’s calling tomorrow. My next appointment isn’t until next week.”

Cynthia laid her head on his chest as Mike stroked her hair.

“I’ll give her the money.”

The blue Sentra hummed softly as Mike went through alternating waves of anger, grief and longing. He’d gotten the address of Greg’s house from the legal advisor at work. It was in a small town south of Houston. Mostly NASA employees lived here, which made the house stand out even more. It was falling apart. He could see wooden

boards in the bay window, and a small hexagonal to its left window which was covered in black paint. The grass had overgrown, a forest amidst the neat, trimmed upper-middle class neighborhood.

He'd borrowed the car from a co-worker. She would recognize the mini-van he owned. After sitting there for an hour wondering what to do, he slowly came to the conclusion that there was nothing he could do. Pray, perhaps. He saw Greg and Jennifer, who was wearing an orange and blue Whataburger uniform, leave that morning in a battered Dodge Omni. It looked as if it had been rolled at one time. She'd been smiling. He'd bitten his lip. He hadn't wanted her to be happy without him, but he didn't want her to be unhappy either. It was almost 3pm. He'd promised Cynthia he'd get together and do something. She'd understand if he was late, but he was tired. The hopelessness and failures were unproductive. He had to let Jennifer go. He wiped the drying tears from his face and went home.

Part II

Long Live Death



Greg felt like an adult, yet also felt too young to be an adult. He was a few months over 19, and his mother was in intensive care. He'd watched helplessly as the paramedics had shown up at the house, watched in numb horror as the woman yelled "clear," and they shocked her heart back to rhythm. All sorts of tubes and wires were now hooked up to her, demanding her breath pour in and out, and her blood keep flowing.

He turned and walked out of the room. He had stopped crying, he figured, because he had run out of tears. His brother, sister-in-law and their kids all sat in the waiting room. He sat down in the orange plastic chair and rested his ankle on his knee, folded his arms, and attempted to catch another nap.

His brother placed a hand on his shoulder. "Greg. It doesn't look good."

Greg swallowed and felt his throat sting. "They want to take her off the machines, don't they."

"They want us to consider it."

The elevator opened and people exited and walked tentatively towards them—people who weren't used to being in ICU with its hushed urgency and blanket of hopelessness. Greg then realized that he knew these people. He stood to greet them. It was five people from the Think Tank, the current events club at his former high school. He'd graduated the year before, but still went to the meetings each Friday at Mr. Gatti's Pizza. It provided a chance to debate with his friends. David approached him first and

embraced him tightly. David then hugged Greg's brother. David had lived with their family after the situation at his own house became abusive. Actually, David was the only "honorary" Think Tank member—honorary, because David went to the rival high school. David and Greg had known each other since kindergarten, and often joined in on Greg's activities, whenever Greg could arrange it.

"How are you doing?"

"As well as can be expected."

He knew three of the others fairly well, and only vaguely knew the fifth person, Jennifer, he thought. She'd just recently joined. She had a fragileness about her that he remembered as naivete. A slight wash of envy came over him. What was it like to be innocent, free from the agony of funerals, strangers attempting to comfort by using clichés? What was it like to not know the inside of a funeral home intimately?

Each person hugged him. He went through the motions of casual talk, explaining that his mother had had an aneurysm burst in her head. He left out the part that his mom had told him she had had a headache and fell asleep in his bed, died in his bed while he fell asleep on his desk after playing a video game. If only he'd woken up earlier. He knew he had killed his mother. Somehow, he could have prevented her coming death. In the end, he'd helped pull the plug. Not by hand, of course, but it might as well have been.

He fell into routine of going to work at Toys-R-Us, coming home, and logging on to the internet. He talked to the people of the Think Tank and others, who cared to make the first contact. Greg preferred not to initiate conversation with people he didn't know. If they wanted to get to know him, they'd have to work at it. The club meetings were the only time other than work that he left the house. Lately, he had even missed those, preferring to stay on-line. He made himself moderator of the chat board. It wasn't official, not set up by the school, but "L'Hotel" was where everyone in the club knew to meet and chat. Greg learned enough computer codes to where he could knock people off-line if he chose. It gave him a sense of power; it helped him stay sane.

Things in the real world, however, began to get more and more chaotic. His brother would come over and they'd fight over the will. There was an estate account that was supposed to go to Greg, but his brother wanted to use it to pay the hospital bills. Greg wanted to use it to pay the bills of the house. David moved back in, making sure Greg took time off to eat and sleep once in awhile.

It was surprising when Jennifer showed up, after she'd gotten into a fight with her father. She'd met Greg on-line and asked if she could come over. He said sure, but it was still surprising. Greg, wearing a dress shirt, black jeans, and holding a cup of coffee, met Jennifer at the door. He didn't know why he dressed up, but for some reason, he wanted to make a good impression. He spilt a few drops of coffee in the foyer as he gestured to let her in. They went to his room and she seemed intrigued as she purveyed

his book collection. She wore shorts and a sleeveless top. Her dark hair was tied back into a ponytail. She picked out On a Pale Horse, by Piers Anthony.

"It's really good," Greg said.

"I tried his Xanth series once," she explained, "but it was *too* magical."

"This has a slant more towards science-fiction."

She traced her fingers along the embossed cover.

"You can borrow it if you like," Greg offered.

"Really?" She smiled.

Her smile touched something in him, something deep. He nodded and returned her smile. The sunlight that poured through the window cast red highlights along her hair. That was the first of several meetings. David was ecstatic. He'd drill Greg about their outings, and try to bow out of any activities that Greg and Jennifer went on, leaving the two alone. As the months passed, Greg realized that Jennifer had awakened hope in him.

Then, she showed up at his house at three o'clock in the morning. She carried a trash bag full of her clothes, a back pack full of books, and a guitar. If she hadn't been crying, he'd have laughed at her attempt to balance everything.

"He said that I couldn't see you," she sobbed. "He doesn't care."

Greg took the guitar and trash bag from her and helped her inside.

"You don't want to do this."

“What do you mean? How can you do this to me?”

“You don’t know what it’s like living on your own. It’s really hard.”

They debated for two hours before Greg finally conceded to let her stay and not tell her father.

Greg actually liked her father at first. They bonded over computers. Perhaps there was some glimpse of his own parents that he saw in him. Then, he heard an argument that ensued while she was on the phone with him. Jennifer set the phone down off the hook so he could hear what it was like. Her father yelled at her for ten minutes about how she was going nowhere with her life.

“All you do is talk on that damn computer! You don’t do anything I ask, and I can’t do this alone. You’re always talking to him instead of to me.”

“Why don’t you like Greg?”

“That boy needs a daddy, and I’m not going to be one!”

After Jennifer moved in, they went to Dallas to visit some of his relatives for Christmas. He found it so amusing that Jennifer was nervous about his relatives. She wanted to impress them so badly. She had changed clothes four times that morning, and spent an hour on her hair. It was cute. Toys-R-Us refused to give him time off, so he quit.

After getting there, they decided to stay. The taxes hadn’t been paid on the house,

and Greg couldn't handle the ghosts that remained there. David joined the army. The IRS could take the house, he finally decided. He and Jennifer talked, cried, and made plans about their futures. She wanted desperately to go to college, and for him to go with her. He never thought about college since his parents had the family business, a trophy engraving shop, that he had originally planned on joining.

Instead, his brother in Houston took over and Greg tried to work there, but there was no getting along with his sister-in-law. Greg suspected she'd married into the family just to get the shop. So, he had kept the job with Toys-R-Us. After two months, Jennifer was still indecisive about whether to transfer to a high school in Dallas or get her GED. The high school kicked her out, or rather said she'd have to repeat her senior year even though all her grades were at high Bs or As. To Greg, it was as good as getting kicked out, an insult to honor. They'd gone out to discuss what to do next. To make matters worse, his sister kept getting on their case about getting jobs. Jennifer cleaned the house weekly to help pay for rent, but they were still coming up short, and his savings was running low.

The night before had been their first fight. She'd jokingly suggested she become a topless dancer, and he had agreed, perhaps too enthusiastically. The ad had said she'd make \$2000 a week. That would have paid the car off in a month. They'd be on their feet so quickly. Greg hadn't realized that she was kidding.

The day had been gorgeous. The sunlight poured over everything. He'd gotten

her flowers and a stuffed animal holding an “I’m Sorry” card, and they went on an impromptu picnic. They lay in the field of dying wildflowers—the park had done lawn care recently—but it didn’t matter. The colors were still beautiful. They had lunch and talked about where they’d live. Maybe move to Austin. Start over. They walked in the house and his sister greeted them cheerfully. “David died.”

“What?”

“David?” she said tentatively now, realizing he actually knew this person. “Died.”

“David who? David who?” he yelled. His heart felt like it would burst.

“David Ferguson,” she replied. And then his heart did burst.

The funeral was a blur. They’d called some friends and found that David had suffered a congenital heart defect. There was nothing that could have been done.

Greg had vague memories of Jennifer packing everything, giving him a sleeping pill and driving back to Houston. They were back at his house. The electricity and water shut off, the mailbox full of past-due notices. It was home.

Why can’t she see that I can never trust again. It’s nothing personal. My self has splintered. I have three sides now. That of Death, that of Thanatos, and that of Greg. Greg rarely surfaces anymore.

When did I fall for her? It was when we were online talking and she broke down about her father and her fighting all the time. She said she couldn’t take it anymore. I

offered to help her “disappear.” I got into researching dark things at that time. I helped people I had met plan some ..how should I put it? gray activities. That’s how I got my connections. With Mom and Dad gone, it was just a long wait until the end. Mom always talked about the coming of the rapture. Now, I couldn’t wait. I knew I wouldn’t be taken first, but I could fight. Fighting was better anyway, more honorable. I could help those who couldn’t fight. People like Jenn; People like Barrett. It would help atone for my sins. I haven’t stepped foot inside a church since Mom died. It had been a ritual of ours, Mom, Dad, David and I would go to church every Sunday, then eat at the Golden Corral. The demons kept me out. I could feel my heart tighten, and my blood pressure shoot up. I would not enter that church, any church, again.

I’m sure Jenn would want to get married in a church. She’s always pressuring me to go to church. I know I said I wanted to get married before. That was before David died. Before I died for certain. She used to have the power to make Thanatos and Death go away. Now, it’s only them. There is no respite. Especially in this house. It is my duty, this house. The electricity is on, at least. The water is off again, but can be turned on when we need it with a quick twist of a monkey wrench. Jenn’s even anal about that.

Barrett entered the room and bowed. I smiled. He offered me a bowl of rice and an iced tea.

I took the food from him, nodding my head in approval. He’d improved much since moving in. We needed renters to pay the taxes, I explained. Barrett’s parents had



kicked him out, and he had known David. That's how we met. Rick, who met in grade school, brought him over. David and Barrett had gone to school together, both from the wrong side of the tracks, as they say.

"Can we train tonight?"

"Maybe later."

"Before Jenn gets home?"

"Perhaps. I did promise we'd go out to eat."

Barrett stood, punching a fist into the wall.

"Geez, Barrett!" I got up to inspect the wall; a slight dent was left. "You'll fix this." He really needed to learn patience.

"She's always trying to keep us apart."

"She's just under stress at work."

Barrett stormed out of the room. I returned my attention to the computer screen.

"Where do you live?" asks an on-line persona, Furies.

I smile to myself, where indeed.

*Thanatos: Purgatory.*

*Furies: \* kisses Thanatos deeply \**

*Thanatos: \* kisses Furies back \**

I remember when Jenn had walked in on a conversation. She asked if it was serious. Serious? How could it be? She didn't understand. It's just how people are.

*Anonymous: Thanatos is a faggot!*

*Thanatos: Who dares speak to me?*

*Anonymous: Faggot.*

I deftly type in an HTML code, and “Anonymous leaves the room” pleasantly scrolls across the screen. The other members of the room applaud.

*Furies: I'd love to get in your pants. I got hold of the picture they're sending around of you.*

*Thanatos: Really? I don't allow pictures of me. \* smiles wickedly \**

There's a knock at the door. “Enter.”

Rick enters the room. “Hi! Busy?”

“Nothing much going on. Fights in the room.”

“I bring gifts.” Rick entered the room with a bottle of Chivas and two glasses.

“Well, you know what they say about Greeks bearing gifts.”

Rick's mother was overbearing and wouldn't let him drink in the house. She was Catholic. Rick undid the Scotch and poured two glasses. After an hour of keeping control of the room, and avoiding other's questions—it was a requirement to keep your distance from the underlings—Barrett entered the room once more, “Sensei?”

I looked up. Rick scowled. The computer chat room wasn't the only place where I had to play moderator.

“Jenn is on the other phone line. She sounds upset, as usual.”

I sighed. Another one of those days. I picked up the phone.

“On the computer again?”

“You know I have to be on here to watch over things. What is it?”

“The Chevette broke down. It won’t start.”

“I’ll see if Rick will pick you up.”

“Sure, no problem,” Rick eagerly volunteered upon hearing my half of the conversation. He liked and respected Jenn, but I think it was just as much to get away from Barrett.

An hour later, I heard the door slam. I grit my teeth and explained to Furies that I’d be away from the keyboard a bit, and logged off. Jenn stormed into the room. Rick, wisely, stepped outside to smoke a cigarette. Barrett, who was dumb as a brick most of the time, remained seated next to me. I could always tell when there’d be a fight. Of course, lately, it was all the time. This guy on line was teaching me web design. I could make a lot of money designing web pages. Why does Jenn have to nag me so much? She used to love me, but now she just doesn’t trust me. What did I do to deserve that? It’s not my fault that my parents died, the car died, or that her father’s fucked up in the head. She doesn’t understand what I’m going through. No one can. She wants me to get along with everyone, like Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. She’s been living on her own for three years and she still has no clue as to what it takes to survive in the real world. Really, she’s not been living on her own. I carried her, like I did Mom after Dad died. I

pulled the plug on Mom. Why was I given that responsibility?

Jenn stood in her office outfit with her hands on her hips. "Barrett, do you mind?"

Barrett looked to me for my approval.

"Barrett, it's my room. Get. Out."

"It's his room."

"You'd best leave," I tried to get him out of the way of flying insults that were about to start.

"You didn't pick me up."

"What's your problem? I sent Rick."

"Who was drunk."

"My friends are never good enough for you."

"I like Rick. The only one I don't care for, is Barrett, and that's because he's a misogynist."

"I had to take care of things on the board."

Tears began pouring down her face. God, I hated that.

"Why don't you care?" She collapsed on the bed, sitting with her face in her hands.

"I do care. Why do you always do this?"

"When are you going to get a job?"

“Fine, I’ll go out tomorrow and get three jobs.”

“Fine. I’m not asking you to get three jobs. I’m only asking you to get one.”

“Whatever.” I felt the anger build. I heard her mumble something about taking a bath, and I was left alone. I sat at the computer. The modems handshake, and I felt my psyche immersed in the comforting liquid of cyberspace.

Part III

Resurrection

There were only a few performers left when Jennifer entered the Red Lion Inn. The restaurant-bar was set up to mirror the feeling of a medieval tavern, with beers served in large frosted mugs and a menu replete with Irish food, including Shepherd's Pie and Haggis. Karen was already there nursing a champagne flute of honey-mead wine. She spotted Jennifer and waved. Jennifer's house was located 45 minutes from downtown, so she'd gotten into the habit of meeting her friend, Karen, each Thursday on the way home from work.

The two fiddlers, one penny-whistle player and bodhran drummer were not so quietly getting drunk. Reels and waltzes were interspersed with the belting of the theme from the Nu-Grape soda commercial.

Jennifer made her way across the bar and ordered a Coke. She took a rubber-band and twisted her dark hair into a ponytail. That particular hairstyle made her feel like a child, but it kept her hair out of her face. Everything had its sacrifices.

"Hi," Karen smiled. "how've you been?"

Jennifer returned her smile. Jennifer had met Karen when the two were working as waitresses at an Italian restaurant. They'd both progressed through various positions, and now Jennifer worked as an answering service operator, and Karen was creative director for Davis and Copeland Advertising. Normally, Jennifer would have felt jealous, but even her insecurities granted Karen special privileges. Besides, she thought, the

answering service let her wear jeans and T-shirts whereas Karen was stuck with professional suits and hose. She hated hose.

“I’m fine, I guess. I can’t stay long, though. Nothing’s new.” Jennifer said as she watched the Celtic jam session.

Karen nodded. “Yeah. Figures.”

“What?” Jennifer asked.

“Nothing.” Karen brushed back her model quality blonde hair. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking it.” They’d had the same conversation each week for the past few months. Karen felt that Jennifer should leave Greg. Jennifer had actually considered it once.

“Greg, I think I want my own apartment. That way we could actually date. You know, you call and set up dinner, bring flowers.” She smiled.

Greg was sitting in front of his computer wearing only his briefs and undershirt. It was after noon, and he hadn’t taken a shower yet. She remembered how he used to be up and dressed before her, even cooking breakfast. That was before his best friend died.

“That would be really cool. We could move the stereo and other expensive stuff to your place. We just can’t afford to live apart right now.”

Jennifer’s heart had sank, but the next day, he’d bought her flowers and started



looking for a better job. That lasted for about a week. The flowers would have made a bigger impact had he not “ordered” Barrett to give them to her. The master-slave, teacher-student, or whatever fantasy they had, was getting very, very old.

Karen had watched as Jennifer was manipulated by different people for as long as she could remember. Jennifer wondered why she stuck by her. First, her parents and grandparents, then her string of boyfriends. The latest one she’d felt secure with. Greg had seemed very supportive of her, even demanding she finish college before they married. Though, lately, she had neither the funds nor the time to take any courses. Every penny, it seemed, went to the credit cards. They’d bought a water heater and an air conditioner. At least the clothes she had bought for work on the Dillards card had been paid off. Greg had bought a computer to get more experience on the latest programs to help his search for a position as a computer technician, he explained.

Jennifer watched as the performers laughed and smiled. The bodhran’s deep thrumming sound calmed her. Greg would get over David’s death. He had to. She looked at her watch. “I need to go. I promised to cover half the night shift because our graveyard operator called in sick.”

“Okay, and Jenn,” Karen laid a hand on Jennifer’s arm. “I’m here if you need me.”

Jennifer smiled. “I know.”

The night had been long, and 3am took its time getting there. Before she left, she spent half an hour explaining to a man that she had no power in the company he was calling and, no, she wasn't at their location, along with a woman who called a corporate office asking for the number to the dog pound. Jennifer realized she was quickly losing hope in humanity the longer she worked there.

The lights sparkled as she drove on Interstate 45. The blur of tail lights on the opposing highway reminded her of ships going into warp drive on the shows Greg watched. The beauty of the city at night caught her off guard at times. She was jolted abruptly back to reality as she heard a popping sound and smoke started pouring out the hood of her car.

"Dammit!" She pulled off the first exit she came to. The car couldn't have picked a worse spot to break down. She was smack in the middle of the Third Ward, the point of Houston where the crime rate was the highest and even the cops feared getting out of their cars. She pulled into an empty parking lot in front of a string of stores: Yummy's Chinese Food, Payless Shoe Source, and Joe's Tropical Fish along with vacant spots awaiting a renter. She turned on her emergency blinkers and got out to look beneath the hood. Heat emanated from the vehicle, and when she hit the safety release on the hood, she could see why. The engine was engulfed in flames. She dropped the hood, coughing and retreated from the burning vehicle.

Jennifer didn't know where they'd get the money to repair this, but she couldn't stay here in the ghost town strip mall.

About four blocks down the road, she could see glowing fast-food signs. She looked at her watch. Nobody would be missing her yet. She got her purse and locked the car. After two blocks, the rain began to fall. She lost her balance and slipped, twisting her ankle. Her shirt clung to her with the mixture of rain, sweat, and now mud. She mused over the last conversation she'd had with Greg. The flywheel had broken and she'd wanted to get it professionally replaced.

"Jenn, we can't afford it."

"I want someone professional, someone who knows what he's doing—"

"Barrett knows what he's doing."

"Yeah, Just like the heap of junk sitting in our garage for the past five months. He swore he know how to fix Citations. He's lost half the parts to the engine."

"He fixed my car just fine. You're too hard on him," Greg snapped.

"Why don't you just go marry *him*," Jennifer retorted and stormed out. Of course, like always, Greg got her to agree to let Barrett work on the car. Now look where it got her. At least the rain might put the fire out, or at least keep it from spreading. She turned and looked at the smokey car still faint in the distance.

Gingerly, she walked in shadows of buildings, ahead towards the fast-food restaurant she'd seen. The Jack n the Box seemed like a golden palace. She limped up

to the door and knocked. The sole worker stated, "No open. No open. Drive-thru open."

Fighting tears, she limped across the street to the Coastal Mart gas station. The tow-truck showed up an hour and thirty minutes later. It had only taken Karen half an hour to meet her. She had tried calling Greg, but the line was busy. Probably on the internet again. They watched as the stocky tow-truck driver attached the blocks and chains that would hold the car in place. The fire had burnt itself out.

"You're very lucky," the man said as he ran the wench. "Boy, this poor car went through a doozy!"

Karen insisted on taking Jennifer to the emergency room to get her ankle x-rayed after they gave directions to the driver and Karen paid with her credit card.

"Look, I'm sorry. I—"

Karen glared at Jennifer. "Don't. Don't make excuses. Let's just go. I know *you're* good for the money."

The next day, Bill, Karen's husband, looked over her car. Bill had owned a mechanic's shop on the north side before he decided to go to law school. He stood in blue jeans and was covered in soot and oil while Karen and Jennifer caught up on the dishes Barrett had left days before.

"Jenn, come out here and take a look at this."

Jennifer wiped at the rivulets of dirty dishwater that ran down her arms with the tail of her shirt. "What?" She felt her chest tighten.

"The idiot left the battery cable laying across the alternator wheel. See?" Bill pulled the melted cord away from the hood that it had adhered itself to. Why this didn't send sparks flying before now, I don't know. With the integrity of the car being shot, and you driving this to and from work at 70mph, you could have been killed."

"What?" Jennifer stared at the lump of metal sitting in her driveway.

"Look. When Karen dented the front of the car's frame after she forgot to set the emergency brake, she turned this into a rolling casket. Even though there was little cosmetic damage, the frame's integrity is gone. I know I told you this before, but I really didn't worry about it because you're such a careful driver. If you'd gotten into a front-end collision, the car would have folded like a beer can. I'm just glad you weren't killed. The wire that was left across the alternator wheel was positive. Any other part of the car is negative. That jackass nearly killed you. I'm going to talk to Greg."

Jennifer nodded numbly and followed Bill into the house.

"Greg, do you know what Barrett did to that car?"

"What?" For once, Greg stopped playing on the computer. He leaned back, running fingers through his thinning hair.

Jennifer felt distant as she watched Bill explain and their voices raise.

"He turned that thing into a death trap!" Bill shouted.

“No.” Greg shook his head. “No, don’t say that. I don’t want to hear.” He turned and went back to his computer game.

“Greg,” Jennifer asked numbly, “why do you care more about people you meet off the chat lines than me?”

“we’re not having this conversation.” Greg turned back to the computer.

Jennifer returned to the kitchen where Karen was leaning against the counter. “Can I stay with you for a few days?” Karen nodded without smiling. In fact, she looked pissed.

“If it’s not a good time?”

“I’m not mad at you.”

They walked to the bedroom and began packing her clothes. Greg faced the computer, ignoring them. Jennifer grabbed some books on music, her guitar, and the unfinished homework assignments from the one semester she was able to attend college that were stacked on her bedside table. She figured she’d need something to do besides going to work.

Karen had a small house at the north side of Houston. They unpacked her belongings in strained anticipation. Bill smiled and made bad jokes once in awhile. Houdini, their purebred Labrador, jumped and licked them in pure childlike joy.

Karen smiled, “He’ll sleep with you if you want. It’s very comforting.”

They put Jennifer in Karen's "office." The room itself was spartan. It contained a single bed with a comforter that was a quilt, made by Karen's grandmother, that had various shades of burgundy. A small bookshelf was against the north wall containing various books: Anthem, Personal Financial Planning, The Norton Anthology of English Literature, The Book of Common Prayer, Starship Troopers, among many. Along the west wall was a light oak desk that held a computer and a printer. The used Wal-Mart sacks full of Jennifer's belongings were carefully stacked in a corner. Most of her clothes were in her backpack. Karen had hung the few hanging garments in the hall closet.

"Are you sure I won't be in your way?" Jennifer rearranged the sacks.

Karen smiled sympathetically. "Get some sleep."

After three hours of staring at the ceiling, feeling her heart pound like the occasional passing cars with heavy bass leaking through, she gave up on trying to fall asleep by herself. She made her way to the kitchen. Houdini followed happily. She got herself a Diet Coke from the refrigerator and foraged through the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. She looked at herself in the mirror. She felt she looked broken. Dark circles beneath her eyes, her eyes themselves looked empty. She retrieved two Tylenol PM capsules and took them. She stared at the bottle, wondering if there were enough pills to kill herself, end her misery. That wouldn't be terribly polite, though, she thought to herself. She replaced the bottle and went back to her room. She glanced at the

bookshelf. It would be a good twenty minutes before the pills took effect. She took the book on financial planning from the shelf and glanced through it. Houdini lied on the bed beside her. She read through balance sheets and budgets. Greg would never agree to a budget. When the cut-off notices and collection agency threats began coming in, Jennifer had pleaded with him. She remembered the time she went to the Consumer Credit Counseling Service. He thoroughly embarrassed her by throwing a tantrum in the hallway. "I'm not going to have anyone telling me what I can and can't do with my money!"

She turned the pages and read the profiles of people with good finance habits. She had tried so hard. Tears began falling onto the page. She smeared them with her hand and set the book on the floor beside her. Tomorrow, she'd begin the process of starting over.

The next morning, she found Karen cooking breakfast.

"Where's Bill?"

"He's researching at the law library. You like eggs?"

Jennifer nodded and sat at the green, breakfast table. "I don't want a lot, though. I'm not terribly hungry."

Karen set the frying pan in the kitchen sink, and set two plates on the table. Then, she retrieved a blue slip of paper and set it beside Jennifer's plate.

"What's that?"



"A phone number."

Jennifer recognized the seven digits.

"Your father's phone number," Karen amended.

Jennifer traced the marbelesque pattern on the table.

"He hates me."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Not exactly."

"You need each other."

Jennifer called in sick to work and spent the rest of the day organizing her belongings. Seventeen thousand dollars in credit card bills and everything she owned fit in the back of a Ford Escort. Jennifer cried. Karen held her.

"How is he going to forgive me?"

"Greg?"

"God, no!" Jennifer wiped tears from her face. "My father."

"You need to forgive him, too. You've spent the past years trying to hurt each other, trying to get even. And sometimes, Jenn, you just need to ask for help."

"I don't know if I can—talk to him, I mean."

Karen handed her the phone. Still cradled by her friend, Jennifer dialed the number.